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THE PRESENT STATUS IN RELIGION

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One of the interesting developments at the present time in the religious world is to be seen among the Jews. As is well known, there are two general types of Jewish religionists, the strictly orthodox and the reformed. The present article shows the state of mind among the leaders of the reformed Jewish rabbis, and it throws valuable comment on the study of religion from the point of view of this faith's growth in importance and influence.

When the giant Goliath menaced the hosts of ancient Israel, David was urged to don the heavy armor and go forth to the fray. Finding himself unable to move by reason of the weight of the coat of mail, David cast it aside and with stout heart fared forth, carrying naught but his staff and five smooth pebbles from the brook, with the sling in his hand.

With giant-like proportions rises before us the mighty theme of this evening's consideration:^{*} "The Present Status in Religion." Your committee urged me to attack this subject, but I cannot move in the heavy armor of metaphysics nor wield the broad sword of philosophy. So I come with naught but the simple staff of life's experiences to lean upon and with a few pebbles I have gathered from the running brook of earnest study and reflection. With these I must essay to bring down this vast theme to the level of thirty or forty minutes. The courageous example of the youthful David inspires me, however, to say with him, "I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts that all this assembly shall know

that the Lord saveth not with sword and spear, but with the spirit."

The spiritual interests of men we are here to consider under the broad connotation "religion." The present situation in religion is distinguished primarily by greater freedom for the spirit in the exercise and expression of religious sentiment and conviction than has ever been known in the past. True, in many places bigotry and persecution still strive to put fetters on the human soul. But it must not be forgotten that all forms of religion still coexist in the world. Side by side, we behold all stages of religious life, from the gropings of the lowest savage after the Great Spirit through all the intermediate phases of the struggle of the human soul up to the highest reaches of the most refined and cultured among civilized races.

True, some governments still hold the church subject to orders, just as they do the army, the navy, and the censorship. Some branches of the church likewise have not yet traveled far on the way of liberalism. None the less the present situation is far better than any that has

^{*}Address delivered before the First Annual Spring Conference of the Chicago Rabbinical Association, April 17, 1917.

ever prevailed heretofore. Governments are less prone and less able to hold religion as a club to enforce submission; religion is no longer able to grasp after temporal power to enforce her authority.

Our blessed country leads in real religious freedom. Despite the efforts of some sectarians, our government wisely favors none while it eagerly fosters all religions. This has made for a more virile and spontaneous religious life than has been possible where Church and State have been united. As a token of this new freedom of the spirit, the famous World's Congress of Religions in Chicago remains the monumental instance. This conference in which we are gathered, one of many of its kind, evidences the growth of that larger fellowship wherein Christians meet with Jews, and Reform and Orthodox clasp hands. Each is loyal to his own, yet we freely pledge our fealty to the common cause of religion and meet to take counsel and encouragement for our common task in fulfilment of the prophet's injunction: "Have we not all one Father, hath not one God created us all?"

The second outstanding characteristic of the present status in religion is an outcome of the first. Freedom in religion has for multitudes come to mean merely freedom from religion. What more common than the outcry we hear on every hand: "Of what use is religion in these terrible days? Where is God? If God lives, why does he permit this mad and cruel war to rage?"

A touching incident is told of a heroic mother who saw her son brought home from the war fatally wounded. When, despite her unwearying efforts to save, he passed away, she found strength in her

patriotic pride to say: "Praised be God, the true Judge." A second time she endured the same trial and laid away her second brave boy with heroic resignation as she said: "Praised be God, the true Judge."

But, when her husband fell, the third sacrifice was too much, and in her nameless grief she sat dazed and speechless, agonizing and wringing her hands. Then the little child that had been spared to her came to her knee and looked up to her with wonder in her eyes and asked the startling question: "Mother is God dead?" Roused from her stupor the mother replied: "God dead, my child! What do you mean?" "When my brothers were taken away you said: 'God lives.' But now you sit and weep and never say a word about God, so I thought he must be dead too." "No, my child," cried the mother clasping the little one to her heart, "God is not dead, God lives and he has sent you to rebuke my unbelief and bring me back to my duty. Yes, God lives, and I will cling to him whate'er betides."

From the lips of a child such a question is naïve, pathetic, childlike. From the lips of a man such a question is blasphemy. It charges upon God the crimes and cruelties of men. True, something died in the hearts of men on the first of August, 1914. God did not die. He lives and pours out his bounties over every land, but men wantonly destroy his gifts and fill the lands with desolation. Why? Because men went astray after false teachers who deluded and betrayed them.

Such a teacher was the German poet and philosopher, Frederick Wilhelm Nietzsche. He began the later period

of his teachings by asserting: "God is dead." The moral law he claimed is founded in error. It has turned the world upside down. A little people on the farthest shore of the Mediterranean of old succeeded in holding mankind by the throat, as it were, and forcing upon it the restraints of the Decalogue. In opposition thereto Nietzsche set up the doctrine of the superman or *Uebermensch*. He asserted that the object of human striving is not to labor for the common welfare, but to produce the strongest type of the individual—strong in body, mind, and will. In the struggle for the survival of the fittest, consideration for the weak, the helpless, and the whole mob of the inferior beings must be crushed out. Nothing may be permitted to hinder the masterful man to rise. No sacrifice may be shunned by him that he may attain to the mastery of the world. In other words, the old pagan doctrine of force must control. It must supplant the old Jewish spirituality. Because these errors have seized upon the minds of men, religion at present faces the intrenched forces of national hatreds, race prejudices, class rivalries, and the whole brood of black immoralities that are the offspring of war.

But long before the war emerged as the inevitable outcome of the cynicism on which men had been fed—indeed, for a whole generation past—religionists were apologetic, timid, shamefaced. Science had overawed them. Her pronouncements were dogmatic. Her assertions were sustained by bewildering discoveries. God seemed expunged from the universe, or at least the Creator was chained and held bound by the inviolable

laws of his creation. The whole universe was considered to be one superb piece of mechanism. A remorseless fatalism settled over the souls of men. Prayer sank into a mumbled and useless formula. Songs of praise died from the lips of multitudes. The skeptic priest halted and stammered in doubt. The people slunk from worship in confusion. It was as though the theory of evolution had killed religion.

The papers and discussions in which we have shared during the past three days have evidenced the fact that religion is now in reality very much alive. You have heard from some of the most eminent authorities in the land of the progress on the intellectual, philosophical, and practical sides which has attended the readjustment of religion to the expanded horizon of this scientific era and to the present-day needs of mankind. We note that science has, in recent days, become far more modest, her pronouncements far less dogmatic. It is found that evolution is not a solution of the riddle of the universe. Evolution is merely the name of a process—a process that begins this side of the unknown and proceeds to the limits of the unattained. To science, even as to religion, origins and destinies are alike enshrouded in mystery.

Face to face with the mystery that underlies the material universe, science has reacted intellectually. The unknown stimulated the mind to rational research. Nothing was left unquestioned. Face to face with the mystery that envelops the psychic life, religion has in the main reacted emotionally and given free wing to the imagination.¹

¹ Shotwell, *The Religious Revolution of To-day*, p. 101.

Science has been obliged to resort to hypotheses, even as religion has resorted to speculative theologies. Both now recognize that through all the work of organic nature a creative force is continuously at work. As a result, the attitude of mind of both science and religion has been manifestly modified and changed.

The scientific spirit has left its deep mark for good on religion. The spirit of research has given us the comparative study of religions, the science of psychology, biblical criticism with its investigations into the genuineness of documents and the true valuation of doctrines, ceremonials, and traditions. By all these means the eternal verities for which religion stands are being vivified and revitalized for men.

We are living in an era of the readjustment of the spiritual life to the new knowledge of a new age. The change wrought in our conceptions of all things in the heavens above and on the earth beneath has been revolutionary. Our ideas of time and space have been immeasurably widened. The history of the universe has expanded from thousands to millions of years. The effect of this effort at readjustment has been twofold. It has so terrified many that they have shut off the divine light of reason and leaped back into the dark of mysticism. Hence such mystic cults as flourish in our day—Spiritualism, Dowieism, New Thought, Christian Science. Upon others the effect of the readjustment has been a leap into Nothingarianism. Religion, they declare, is a failure. Therefore multitudes stand apart from organized religion today, and the synagogues and churches

number far less in their ranks than are those without.

Recently I heard the remark concerning an eminent clergyman in New York: "He could not keep his own sons and daughters faithful to the church. Something must be wrong."

Yes, something is wrong. It lies, not in religion, but in the failure of religionists to bring home with vital effect to the world the truth that the new heavens and the new earth revealed by telescope and microscope have revealed also the Creator more unspeakably sublime than the limited concept of earlier days could grasp, and exalted far above aught our highest thought can reach. We have outgrown our childish conceptions of God, but we have not faced with seriousness the consequent duty of deepening the sense of our dependence, our trust, our love, and our faith in God.

Miracles, signs, and myths filled with awe the souls of our sires and made them worshipful. How much more, then, should we drive home to the souls of the people the awe and reverence that must dwell in the heart of a generation which is witnessing the revelations of God as manifest in the marvels of the discoveries, the explorations, and the attainments of this scientific age. A new and far deeper reverence is bound to come into the hearts of men when the newness and the commonplaceness of our possessions have yielded to a true apprehension of the glories they reveal. A purer, more vivid, and potent religious life than has ever been known before will come in the degree in which we vitally realize the marvelously expanded significance of the familiar outcry: "Who is like Thee among the mighty, O God, who is like

Thee exalted in holiness, working wonders?"

A third factor of the present situation in religion here manifests itself. It is the fact that to many the enlargement of the human horizon has tended to drive God entirely out of human life. God is so great, so sublime, how can the majestic Creator of this vast universe stand in any relation to such petty insignificant creatures as are we mortal beings?

In his searching and masterly analysis of the development of the God concept in Israel, Dr. E. G. Hirsch presents to us¹ a picture of how in the course of centuries the conflict raged between those who conceived God as transcendent and those who considered him immanent—the extremes we now call transcendentalism and pantheism. Between a God who is beyond the world of matter and a God who is immanent in, and absorbed by, the world of matter, yawns a fatal chasm. The intellect unaided is unable to apprehend God, as Maimonides averred. The modern Jewish view in the main reproduces and reaffirms that of the biblical books—that the human heart is the first source of the knowledge of God and realizes him as the living, personal, eternal, all-sustaining source of life and of goodness, Father of all. We grasp God with our intuitions long before these can be confirmed by our intellects. The mystery of our self-conscious being rests in the mystery of a self-conscious Deity. Our faith in truth posits a God of truth. Reason within me demands supreme Reason above me. Conscience is not a mere social product, but the response within me to an inviolable moral order above me. My free will,

however feeble, is a reflex of the freedom of God my Creator. It is through these endowments that each human being is "created in the divine image and likeness" and may realize his relation to God as personal, direct and immediate.

Yet at best this relationship remains exceedingly abstract. Other religions have striven to make the divine personality tangible and have, thereby, limited God and marred his perfection. Not so Judaism. It has consistently throughout the centuries rejected every compromise that might endanger its purely spiritual affirmations concerning Deity. We stand firm on that great refusal. This makes our task on its practical side most difficult. We have revolted against the extreme which, e.g., made of the symbolism of the Torah almost a fetish-worship. We have eliminated obsolete and meaningless rites and ceremonies; we have fulminated against mere letter-worship, lip-service, and spiritless formalism. But negation is barren. The needs of the human heart demand that reason be reinforced by imagination; reflection set aglow with emotion. Rites, forms, and symbols are the outer language of religion. Mere "resolves of the heart are naught"—they must find expression.

If religion is not creative today, it must at least be re-creative. We need the symbolism, the ritual, the institutes, of the days of a living, throbbing faith. Our task is to reform—i.e., to re-create these in conformity with the requirements of the modern home and the modern synagogue to make them a sincere expression of the hopes, the ideals, and the needs of our own souls.

¹ Jewish Ency. Article: "God."

A fourth situation in religion today is that created by the effort to divorce morality and religion. It is a commonplace utterance of the man on the street that "I try to do what is right, to do charity, and be a good citizen—I don't need any religion." This superficial point of view finds reinforcement in the philosophy which rests the sanctions of morality and the grounds of obligation in a mere utilitarian system. As a matter of course the fear of the policemen's club or the sheriff's posse or even the sincere desire to secure "the greatest good for the greatest number" is potent to keep many upright. It is not a very lofty reason for a moral life. The consciousness of this fact has spurred many to devise some higher and more ideal standards of inspiration on which to base life's conduct. If God is to be deposed, some other authority must usurp the vacant throne. Therefore we have in the present status of religious thought efforts to found the religion of democracy, the religion of humanity, and the like. This in itself is a confession that all morality is based on spiritual idealism.

Our highest dignity lies in this: each is a free moral agent. However limited its scope, each one has a free will of his own. Not a sane human being but is endowed with some moral capacity. In every thought, motive, and impulse the cry of conscience rings out the irrepressible "ought" of duty. It is my chief glory that I may say "yes" or "no." This is the token of a moral power possessed by no other earthly creature. I may honor or dishonor the claims of duty. The possession of this power links me with a power not myself that

restrains me from the evil and impels me to the good. This craving after moral perfection, inherent in the human soul, constrains me to affirm the existence of Absolute Perfection above me. The moral order that has been ordained in the very nature of things holds me bound, however, by its inviolability. Nothing so fills me with awe in moments of deepest candor and self-scrutiny as the solemnity of this supreme gift of moral accountability, for by it I am most nearly allied to the supreme Will manifest in all creation. Through it I am made a co-worker with God. To think that even a spark of that divine energy is part of my endowment fires my soul with fervent zeal to merit so holy a gift.

Where there is a weakness of moral fiber it is because of the absence of the divine inspirations and sanctions of morality. Deep are the refining influences of art, of aesthetics, of music, of the eloquent intellectual appeal; but none of these are to be compared to the strong and lasting influence wrought by a prayerful communion with the source of all moral power. Prayer is the most powerful moral force known to the human race. Prayer melts obduracy and harshness; it drives out cruelty and injustice. To breathe a prayer is to breathe the very air of benevolence and good will. Though a prayer begin in self-pity, it will end in sympathy and lead to remorse and good deeds. With a sincere prayer on his lips no man can do a mean or ignoble act. No man can utter lies in prayer. As an agency for ethical culture prayer thus stands supreme. The society dedicated to ethical culture has, in fact, been unable to

eliminate entirely from its meetings some forms and observances. Synagogues and churches need to be on their guard lest they overemphasize the sermon, the music, and the illuminated windows. What are these without prayer but a frame without a soul. Unless we put our souls into our ministry as well as our brains, we cannot hope to overcome existing apathy and indifference. This is the ultimate test of our ministry. We must be able to pray and make men feel worshipful. Like the high priest of old, the minister must come into the Holy of Holies of the temple of the soul. We can quicken the soul life of others only as we vitalize our own. This is the hardest task of the minister in this prosaic, matter-of-fact age in which sentiment has a stony heart and her tears are crystal—brilliant but icy. None the less our chief task is to infuse our congregations with the inspirations of the righteous life through the soulful impress of worship. Let us realize and make others feel that prayer is a human need we cannot deny. Has it any efficacy with God?

Knowing that prayer has such a marvelous subjective effect on ourselves in making and strengthening character is enough to warrant our faith that the spiritual Power ruling the world has not given us this most precious capacity only to mock and deceive us. It is surely a reflex of the divine power whence it emanates. "To comprehend God one must be God," said Goethe. How God answers prayer we know not, but surely spirit responds to spirit by spiritual means. When our gross powers of apprehension fail, it is enough for us to trust.

I have emphasized these four spiritual phases of the present situation in religion

because I feel confident that the force that is inherent in them, however insufficiently I have been able to suggest it, reveals the remedy for the latest condition that has arisen.

The world has lapsed into a lamentable state whose woe beggars all description. The world-war has revealed how far away we have fallen from the sublime ideals which true religion enshrines. It is needless to rehearse the events which have exposed the inner rottenness of so-called modern civilization. Assassination combined with conspiracy and greed overwhelmed the Old World. All the elemental passions were let loose. The moral law, the divine ideal, all the spiritual treasures of the race, have been sacrificed. In their place has come a mad devotion to nationalism, racialism, and the clamor for group rights. These have their place in the historical development of peoples, but to arrogate to themselves the first place is a new claim. We have lived to witness for the first time in Jewish history, as far as I know, the amazing affirmation that all these precede and religion is but an incident—a minor, cultural, even negligible, consideration. Lower than this we cannot descend. Let us lead the ascent!

Religion is not a failure. It is not outgrown. It is not bankrupt. Without religion the world will never be healed from the woes that afflict it. Upon the teachers and ministers of religion descends with a more compelling force than ever before the duty to proclaim its divine message. He warned wisely who proclaimed that "this is one message that no other agency can or will give—spiritual uplift and moral stimulus

—therefore let ministers and congregations dedicate themselves unswervingly and unremittingly to this task.”¹

There is no denying the correctness of that principle. Its restatement is most timely in view of the present situation, which misleads some into all sorts of enterprises. In the simpler conditions of life in other days the preachments of the pulpit led to immediate activities among the people. The heart was touched by the appeal for suffering, and the congregation doled out alms. The church and the synagogue of old decided causes; they gave moral inspirations to political issues; they were the centers of learning, of the social life. Domestic joys and sorrows were consecrated within the sanctuary, which was the religious home and the communal center.

It is a misunderstanding and belittling of an earnest aim to charge that we are but reaching out for fads when we open the synagogues and churches every day to make them active centers of civic, social, educational, and philanthropic endeavors. The sanctuary and the schoolhouse have too long stood bleak and empty amid the tides of life surging about them. It is time that the doors be opened and the lights kindled, and that living, inspiring voices touch with the holy fires of enthusiasm and consecration the daily doings of the people. We are but bringing back the synagogues to their legitimate and traditional place and function. Nothing in life of the people should be alien to the interests of the sanctuary. Over all the pursuits of

men shall religion spread its ennobling and hallowing influence to keep them pure. Above partisanship, above personal interest, the sanctuary must take its stand as the inspirer and guide in all endeavors for the common welfare.

As the judge is the embodied conscience of the community, standing for justice, so the minister should be its embodied character, standing for righteousness. The conscientious judge, even in seclusion, is an active force for good in the community. The conscientious minister, even though the masses do not flock to hear him preach, may be a more potent influence by his very presence and his earnest life. He is higher than the judge, as the law itself accedes, for through religion the secular is sanctified. By it all the crises of life, birth, marriage, parenthood, and all the offices of duty and the mysteries of growth, death, and destiny are consecrated.

The church and the synagogue, the worship and the ceremonial, the Sabbath and the festivals, the institutes and the ordinances, changed though they be to meet the present situation, have their greatest work yet to do. For through them alone is it given to make men and nations see, from the standpoint of eternity, the true values of all the interests and activities of time. With the youthful David of old, religion, renewed and rejuvenated, now says to a warring world: “I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts that all this assembly shall know that the Lord saveth not with sword and spear, but with the spirit.”

¹ Professor J. H. Hollander, of Johns Hopkins University, “The Interest of Young People in the Congregation,” address before the U.A.H.C., January 16, 1917.